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SUCCESS STORY

Family Planning and Islam

Muslim Religious Leaders Issue a National *Fatwa* in Support of Family Planning



Photo by: TSAP/AED

The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Ali Gomaa (second from right), meets with Filipino Muslim religious leaders (MRLs) and an Egyptian staff of The Futures Group during a study tour of the Filipino MRLs in Cairo.

In the Philippines' Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) – composed of the provinces of Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, and Marawi City – fertility rates are far higher and contraceptive prevalence rates much lower than in the rest of the country. Maternal and infant death rates in ARMM are also among the highest in the country.

One reason for this has been the lack of clear guidelines about the role of family planning in Islam. To clarify the matter, in early 2004, the Assembly of Darul

Ifta – the biggest and most influential group of Muslim religious leaders in the country – issued a national *fatwa* (religious decree) on reproductive health and family planning, a landmark event. Many see the *fatwa* as a major breakthrough towards improving family planning practice in the region and consequently helping to reduce maternal and infant deaths.

The idea of a *fatwa* was first brought up by the participants of the first ARMM Health Congress held in Manila in June 2003. The Congress, convened by the ARMM Regional Government with technical assistance from USAID's The Social Acceptance Project-Family Planning (TSAP-FP), brought together various stakeholders – ARMM government officials, local government officials, provincial health officers and religious leaders.

A group of these religious leaders (identified jointly by the Commission on Population, USAID's TSAP-FP and the United Nations Population Fund or UNFPA) underwent a series of orientation seminars on family planning and Islam, and then crafted a draft *fatwa*. In a conference in Davao City in October 2003, the draft *fatwa* was presented by the Assembly of Darul Ifta to about 80 religious leaders from Mindanao. The conference generated many valuable comments and suggestions, which were used to refine the *fatwa*. The revised *fatwa*, written in English, was sent by the UNFPA to Egypt for translation into Arabic. On November 23, 2003, both English and Arabic versions were signed by 23 members of the Assembly of Darul Ifta. In January 2004, through USAID's TSAP-FP, a group of religious leaders went on a study tour in Cairo, Egypt. The highlight of the trip was an audience with the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Ali Gomaa, who gave his blessing, orally and in writing, to the *fatwa* prepared by the Filipino religious leaders. On March 10, 2004, in a colorful and festive ceremony in Davao City, the Assembly of Darul Ifta officially launched the national *fatwa*.

More Muslim couples are beginning to realize that family planning practice can indeed improve the quality of their lives.